

05/28/92

SHORTGRASS COUNTRY by Monte Noelke

Far from where the road going south from the ranch hits Interstate 10, on the New Mexico and Arizona line, a small paved highway turns off toward Rodeo, N.M. Such notable Indian chiefs as Cochise and Geronimo battled for those lands in the 1880s; outlaws from Mexico and the U.S. hid in lairs high up in the isolated canyons.

Reservations were tight for a recent tour in that area. Bird watchers descend in numbers that'd make a full fledged salmon run in the Northwest look like a trout swirl in Walden's Pond. Only luck provided a couple of nights at a lodge owned by the Museum of Natural History.

Bird fanciers are easy to get along with as long as you accept that they never take their binoculars from their eyes outdoors, and you learn to stay on the ground, out of the trees. The way to gain their attention is to hold a hat over the end of their field glasses and imitate a bird's call. Crowing like a rooster won't work, but whistling like a bob white quail stops them long enough so you can pass around them in a narrow trail.

On one walk, an hombre in a bright blue jump suit had blocked the path with about \$4000 worth of camera equipment mounted on a tripod, backed by spotting scope powerful enough to track space ships on a cloudy day.

He admitted he was president of a bank in Colorado, so right off I became his friend. However, crawling under his tripods with small pack and a canteen was impossible. A steep ridge had the left side stopped, and a five-ton rock made passing on the right hard to accomplish.

But the financing of long term money on hollow horns and woolies instills a respect for jugkeepers that last until eternity. I told him I didn't mind at all backtracking two miles and taking the steeper trail. Also, I promised I'd ask the park ranger to round up some of the ex-miners down at the beer joints in Rodeo and have them dynamite out a spot better suited to set up his equipment.

I didn't dare ask questions around the museum's properties, but I suppose quite a number of ex-bankers and former savings and loan officers are drifting back into the Tombstone and Bisbee country where the Hole in the Wall gang found such good cover.

The ranger's note pad was filled with memos reporting bird sightings. I dearly hope the banker doesn't think I broke my word. The odds are low, but in our game you never can tell where we'll need a loan.